



Pvt. Joseph H. Lawter

### MR. JOE LAWTER

**TODD:** Today is December 7th, 1987. My name is Joe Todd and this is an interview with Mr. Joe Lawter in Oklahoma City. Mr. Lawter, where were you born? Lawter: I was born in Oklahoma, in Weatherford. The family only lived there about six months and we moved into Oklahoma City and I've been here ever since.

**T:** When is your birthday?  
**L:** May 12th, 1921.

**T:** Who was your father?  
**L:** Zeb Lawter.

**T:** And your mother?  
**L:** Francis Ellen Harrall.

**T:** Were they both from Oklahoma?  
**L:** My mother was a homesteader from Missouri and my father came from Illinois. She homesteaded near Custer City, rather her father did.

**T:** Why did the family move to Oklahoma City?  
**L:** My daddy was secretary-treasurer of the Farmers Union for about 40 years.

**T:** What part of Oklahoma City did you live?  
**L:** Main and Klein Streets right where the Farmers Union building is today.

**T:** Where did you start to school?  
**L:** I started to Franklin, then Roosevelt Junior High and then Central High and graduated in 1939. I later came back as principal from 1960 to 1968.

**T:** What was Oklahoma City like in the late 20's and 30's?  
**L:** A lot different than it is now. There was a lot more activity then. Katz at Main and Robinson was the big store downtown. They had the electric rail cars. It was an active town then.

**T:** What did you do for recreation during high school?  
**L:** I had a paper route at Station A, down-

town. Then we went to the show. We had dates and would go out on the town.

**T:** After high school what did you do?  
**L:** I joined the Marines after high school.

**T:** Where did you go through Boot Camp?  
**L:** San Diego.

**T:** Tell me about Boot Camp?  
**L:** Boot camp was rough in those days. The sergeants were Marines and they wanted the recruits to be tough Marines.

**T:** Why did you join the Marines?  
**L:** Well, I had been delivering papers since I was 11 or 12 and I had one year at Central State and I was tired of papers and thought it would be fun to join the Marines.

**T:** Any reason why the Marines over the Army or the Navy?  
**L:** Glamorous. I saw the blue uniforms.

**T:** Boot Camp lasted how long?  
**L:** Seems like about 8 weeks.

**T:** From Boot Camp, where did you go?  
**L:** I went to the Marine Band. I played violin for the band that played for the officers. They shipped me out with the band and I chose the piccolo. We played for officers dances.

**T:** How long did you study music?  
**L:** I studied music until I went into the Marines. I decided I would get out of the band. I didn't want to play the violin for the rest of my life and they told me to learn the bugle, so I did. As a bugler I could go to sea.

**T:** You became a bugler and went to sea.  
**L:** Yes, I went aboard the *Oklahoma* in February or March of 1941.

**T:** Where did you board the *Oklahoma*?  
**L:** I went over on the *Yorktown* and boarded in Honolulu.

**T:** The war was going on in Europe, and did you have any idea we would get involved?  
**L:** You had to live in those days and I knew it was only a matter of time. Roosevelt was talking about peace, but he couldn't keep us out.

**T:** Did you think we would be attacked by the Germans or the Japanese?  
**L:** The Japanese.

**T:** Didn't Billy Mitchell describe an attack on Hawaii?  
**L:** There was a book out that described the attack and the Japanese followed that plan. About one month before Pearl Harbor we were warned of a possible engagement with the Japanese. We were called to general quarters and told of a possible attack at Pearl, but Pearl was so peaceful, we didn't think about an attack.



Marines detachment doing rifle drill  
Wachtler collection

**T:** Before the attack, what was your average day on the *Oklahoma*?

**L:** I was one of two buglers, me and a Navy bugler, and we spent time up around the officers deck. I cleaned officers quarters and then we were on duty for the calls on the ship.

**T:** Did you ever clean the silver on the ship?  
**L:** I really don't remember. I understand it is here in the museum.

**T:** That is correct.  
**L:** One thing I remember, the anchor that is on display downtown, I chipped and painted that anchor. That was one of my jobs.

**T:** Tell me about chipping the anchor.  
**L:** Well, you just chipped the old paint off and repainted it.

**T:** Is it painted the correct color?  
**L:** I think that grey is close.

**T:** Where were your quarters on the ship?  
**L:** It's so long ago, but it seems they were midship, and about second deck down, but I wasn't down there very much. I went back aboard the *Oklahoma* when she was raised and the only thing I found in my locker was my class ring and I have it to Central High School.

**T:** What were you doing on December 6th, Saturday.  
**L:** I think we were at sea and came into port.

**T:** Did you go on liberty that night?  
**L:** No, I stayed on the ship, I had the duty the next morning. The Navy bugler and me would alternate in sounding the calls. I had the duty Sunday Morning. Even if I didn't have the duty, I would have been there, because you stay on the ship at

night unless you were first class.

T: Did you have a hammock or a bunk on the ship?

L: I had a bunk.

T: How were the Marines treated differently than the Navy?

L: Oh, I don't know. The chiefs and some of the first class people had beds. We had to stand duty day and night.

T: Why were there Marines on the *Oklahoma*?

L: The Marines are the policemen on the ships. They are assigned to the major ships.

T: So, December 7th, start with the time you got up, and tell me what happened.

L: I got up about 6:30. We don't have reveille on Sunday, the men get to sleep in that day. When it comes to the flag, it is a little different. First call is sounded at 5 minutes before 8:00 and To The Colors is sounded at 8:00. We had the Marines that stand guard over the flag, then the bugler is behind the colors. I don't recall sounding anything that morning at all. I do remember sounding first call at 5 minutes before 8:00. I sounded first call and I looked up and said to the corporal of the guard, those are Japanese planes. And the corporal of the guard said to me, "Lawter, you're paid to blow, not think". And I repeated they were Japanese planes. About that time we got hit with the first torpedo. I never did sound To The Colors, the attack came 2 or 3 minutes before 8:00. I was supposed to sound general quarters with the bugle, but I told the Boatswain's Mate who blows the little whistle and I told him to go ahead and tell them. He said, "General Quarters, General Quarters, and this is no bullshit". That probably saved more lives on the *Oklahoma* than anything, because you wouldn't dare say that unless you meant it. The boatswain's Mate kept repeating that. My duty was with Captain Foy, I was his orderly. But the captain was not there. Commander Kenworthy, the Executive Officer was in charge of the ship. I found him and he was walking up and down the deck and she was starting to list. I said to him, "we better get off this thing". He said "you're right bugler, pass the word to abandon ship". That's when we abandoned ship. I went over the side and took off my clothes except for my skivvies. I took the bugle and threw it far as I could into the water. Then I slid into the water and started swimming to the *Maryland*. While I was in the water, the *Arizona* blew up, everything was flying in the air. The water was on fire. I was a good swimmer and I got to the *Maryland* about a quarter after 8:00. They pulled me up on deck. I had trained on the 5 inch guns, but we didn't have any chance of

hitting them. To this day Honolulu thinks they were bombed, but it was the shells we were firing at the Japanese were landing in Honolulu. Then I jumped in the water and swam to the submarine base and helped them unload an ammunition ship.

T: What was your first reaction when you saw the Japanese airplanes?

L: I'm not sure I was scared, you don't have time to be scared, if you are going into battle someplace, you don't have time to get scared.

T: Did you know they were going to attack?

L: No. I didn't have any idea. I don't think I was scared that whole day, it was just reacting. They tried to give Purple Hearts for two or three days. I got my foot scratched on a piece of glass and I wouldn't take the Purple for that.

T: When that first torpedo went off, what were you thinking?

L: Well, I knew we were being bombed at that point. I was sure they were Japanese planes, but I didn't know what was going to happen. That plane dropped the torpedo in the middle of the harbor and flew right over the top of our honor guard getting ready to raise the flag and you could see the rising sun and the pilot. You really have to know the channel, but they could drop those torpedoes and they would go right into the ships.

T: On The *Oklahoma*, the attack was just a few minutes before 8:00.

L: Yes.

T: You said you sounded First Call?

L: That's right.

T: When do you sound First Call?

L: Five minutes before 8:00.

[describes the attack on the *Oklahoma* using a photograph and a map of Pearl Harbor].

T: What happened on the *Arizona*?

L: All I know is just what I read. I was in the water, and it caused a big swell in the water.

T: How many ships were destroyed?

L: The *Oklahoma* rolled over, the *Maryland* was bombed, the *California* was beached, The *West Virginia* and *Tennessee* had bomb hits. The *Arizona* blew up and the *Nevada* got under way, but they beached it so they wouldn't block the harbor.

T: What was the first thing you remembered doing after the attack?

L: Well, you have to remember, during the attack, when I jumped off the ship, instead of swimming to Ford Island, I swam across the harbor to the Sub Base.

T: Why?

L: I don't know why, crazy, I guess. Of course there was debris on the water but I could really swim in those days. It is about 3/4 of a mile across the harbor. The map the Japanese had showed an aircraft carrier docked where the *Ogalala* was. It was blown out of the water. All the aircraft carriers stayed out an extra day, but I don't know why.

T: When you saw the *Oklahoma* roll over, what were your thoughts?

L: I thought they would get us all. I swam to the *Maryland* and she wasn't hit by the first wave. The first wave were the torpedo planes and the second wave was the bombing. The *Maryland* was hit by the second wave. I got scared on the *Maryland* and took off across the harbor. About half way across a guy grabbed me and almost drowned me, he was panicking. I might tell you for a day or two afterward, I was assigned to the Chaplains. There were three, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant. I helped get the bodies as they floated to the top. Then I was the bugler when they had the burials. There were several mass burials on Hawaii.

T: What were your duties during the burials?

L: They would say a few words, then I would blow taps. All three chaplains said a few words at each mass burial, because no one knew who the bodies were.

T: Did you think the Japanese were going to invade?

L: I thought they were, they could have taken the island. We were so disorganized. In those days, they thought the battleships were unsinkable, then more emphasis was put on aircraft carriers than battleships. In 1941, the battleships were proven to be pretty obsolete.

T: How much armor plating did those ships have?

L: Oh, about 6 inches. That seems a lot, but the air tight doors were open. I went back to Hawaii 45 years after the attack, the Japanese couldn't beat us with instruments of war, but they beat us with money. It's sad for a person like me who fought them and then that happen, but that is their right.

T: Exactly where were you on the ship that morning?

L: I was on the fantail, ready to blow "to the colors".

T: That is on the fantail of the ship?

L: Yes, at the back of the ship, next to the flagpole.

T: The attack was over and you said you worked on an ammunition ship?

L: Yes, I helped unload an ammunition ship in the afternoon. Then they asked for volunteers to go on the *Pennsylvania*

and man the machine guns. I got some clothes there.

T: How long did it take for the Navy to get organized after the attack?

L: It depends on what you call organized. As far as the battleships were concerned, they never did get organized, but they did on the aircraft carriers.

T: Why did the aircraft carriers stay out?

L: I don't know, you'll have to ask someone higher up than me. It is fantastic to me that there was so many warnings, but no one paid any attention.

T: Do you think Roosevelt knew about the attack?

L: I think Roosevelt knew we were going to be attacked and he was glad to get us in the war, but not as bad as happened.

T: To what ship were you assigned after the attack?

L: I wasn't, I was assigned to a casual company.

T: What did you do the rest of the war?

L: Stayed on Hawaii mainly. I went to Midway for a couple of days. I was sent back to the states and put in the 26th Marine Division and sent to officers candidate school and I was there when the war ended.

### MR. ROBERT McMAHON

Interviewed by Joe Todd on May 13th, 1990 in Oklahoma City at the reunion of the *USS Oklahoma*.

Todd: This is May 13th, 1990. My name is Joe Todd and this is an interview with Mr. Robert McMahon in Oklahoma City at the reunion of the *Oklahoma*. Sir where were you born?

McMAHON: I was born Carrolton, Illinois on July the 5th, 1921.

T: When did you join the Navy?

M: I joined September 15, 1939 and entered Boot Camp from the Los Angeles area.

T: Why the Navy over the Army or the Marines?

M: I wanted to go to the Naval Academy and I went through the political process and he said he had an Army appointment, but I was set on the Navy. My uncle suggested I join the fleet because so many were accepted into the academy from the ranks. We were separated and there were three of us that went aboard the *Oklahoma* and took preparatory courses. I passed and I went on leave one time and got married and that disqualified me. But when I finally got my commission, I was 2,800 numbers ahead of the class I would have graduated with, so I wasn't too unhappy.

T: Where did you go for Boot Camp?

M: San Diego. I checked in Los Angeles that day, was put on a bus to San Diego, got in line, got our hair cut, got our uniforms issued to us. Then we got 6 or 7 shots in the arm and that was the first day of Boot Camp. It was a very dramatic thing, because you are in civilian clothes and all of a sudden you have a hair cut and you are in the Navy.

T: Any specific incidents you can recall about Boot Camp?

M: Well the regimentation, but I thought it was great after the first few weeks. We had three weeks of intensive training on the grinder where they would march you all day long. They issued us shoes with soles two inches thick and you would wear them down in a week. We got a good rounded training in 10 or 12 weeks. Then they immediately assigned us to a ship and I went aboard the *USS Oklahoma* just before Thanksgiving of 1939. We were green recruits and some funny thing happened on the first day. The old timers would tell us to put our new shoes in a certain place and they would disappear, or they would send you up for some green oil for the starboard running light and of course they were all electrical and we were dumb enough to go look for it. Things like that. It was kind of an orientation.

T: Did you request the *Oklahoma*?

M: I didn't request any ship. It was just what ship was in port and what they needed. My company had about 150 men in it and I think we went on 10 or 15 different ships.

T: When you first saw the *Oklahoma*, what was your reaction?

M: It was a big ship. I had never been on a ship and it was enormous. The thing that impressed me, being a young seaman, was the activity. All the people seemed to have a job to do. The deck seemed to be snow white. They tarred those decks, so they had the black lines and the white decking from being scrubbed down. Just the enormity of the ship.

T: You were assigned to which division?

M: The Fourth Division, the deck division. Mainly you would be put in the deck division and then had a choice of which other division you wanted to go into. When I realized how nice it was to be on the bridge, shining instruments and raising flags instead of scrubbing the decks, I chose to go into the M Division which is the Quartermaster Division. We were responsible for the navigation of the ship, winding the chronometers of the ship, steering the ship. It was our job to instruct other men on how to handle the wheel. That big wheel you have at the Historical Society, I have handled many times.

T: Describe your quarters?

M: The quartermasters had the steering engine room aft. That is the after part of the ship and the two propeller shafts go through the middle part of the compartment. We had our bunks on either side of the shafts. It didn't seem to bother us, you could step over them. Then the quartermaster second class was a little higher and he slept in the storeroom. He had his



The captain's cabin on the *Oklahoma*.  
National Archives